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A Structural and Functional Analysis of Dream Narratives

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This article demonstrates that elicited dream narratives use a differing narrative structural and functional framework, as proposed by Labov and Waletzky's (1967) narrative framework on elicited personal narratives. A quantitative structural and functional analysis of five male and female collected samples showed that dream narratives follow a homogenous structure of (1) Topic introduction, (2) Orientation, (3) Complication, (4) Evaluation, and (5) Coda, consequently reflecting the omission of Labov and Waletzky's (1967) proposed resolution unit, which confirms Labov's (1997) suggestion of the difficulty to distinguish between resolution and coda. Moreover, this article devotes attention to specific structural particularities, proposing that analepses and prolepses might indicate, firstly, the simultaneous processing of new spatial information and new protagonists, and secondly, reflecting indirectly the experience of dream bizarreness.

Keywords: dream narrative, structural and functional framework, analepsis, prolepsis

The term *narrative structure* generally refers to the structural framework underlying the order and manner in which a narrative is recalled and presented to a reader, listener, or viewer. In a previous linguistics study entitled *Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experiences*, Labov and Waletzky (1967) established a formal structural framework for narratives, outlined in structural units: (1) Abstract, (2) Orientation, (3) Complication, (4) Evaluation, (5) Result, and (6) Coda.

The structural abstract unit of a story provides the listener with an outline of the main content and the relatability of a subsequent recapitulated narrative. The structural orientation unit informs the listener about the narrative's participants and their temporal, local, and behavioral circumstances, often found embedded in the opening sequence of a narrative or placed in between the abstract and complication units in the form of free clauses. The structural complication unit conveys a specific or interlinked chain of actions. This is followed by a structural evaluation unit, which functions as the main kernel of a narrative as it establishes the personal relation and interest and conveys the point of the story and its significance in relation to its relatability.

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However, it has to be considered that Labov and Waletzky's (1967) study was based on elicited personal narratives evolving around the topic of survival ("What was your most terrifying experience?"), which might prompt more of a homogeneous structural framework and a more specific narrative outcome, such as that embodied in a structural resolution unit.

In contrast to Labov and Waletzky's (1967) suggested narrative framework hypothesis for oral personal narratives, this study addresses the structure and function of the narrative elements of dream narratives by applying Labov and Waletzky's (1967) displacement-set method, in which each clause is tested in relation to an alternative position within the whole set of a narrative sequence. The displacement-set results are documented in a displacement-set chart for each examined narrative, and the emerging visual patterns of the displacement sets form different structural units. Specific dream narratives can be regarded as a particular kind of personal narrative, which can but does not necessarily imply a positive outcome, hence a distinction can be made between enjoyable dreams and nightmares.

This study will pay particular attention to the overall structural framework of dream narratives collected for this study, bearing in mind Labov's (1997) argument that the resolution and coda cannot always be differentiated. Hence, it might be taken as a given that nightmares laden with tension and conflicts may or may not propose a resolution unit, whereas positive dreams may not imply any conflicts, arousing positive emotions and therefore not calling for a resolution unit.

METHOD

Participants

The data for this study were collected from white, British undergraduate males and females aged 20 to 29 years. The ten oral samples of dream recollections from male and female participants were recorded using an Olympus DS-2 voice recorder, from which the spoken text was transcribed and divided into clauses.

Data

The collected and transcribed male and female dream narratives were analyzed in relation to the structural framework, employing a structural-analytic approach fundamentally based on the displacement-set method proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1967).

Procedure

Informal interviews were conducted between the researcher and the participants, discussing the topic of dreams in general and involving the exchange of personal information in order to establish a sense of comfort between the participants and the researcher, which eased the situation in order to elicit a very personal

and intimate recapitulation of a dream event. During the interview situation, the researcher supported the male and female participants through granting them the entire conversational floor and the freedom to explore and elaborate on his or her dream memory in as much detail as possible and to mention all important aspects.

Design

The displacement-set method probes each clause of a narrative for the potential displacement of a different position before or after the clause's original position in a narrative. A displacement for a narrative clause is perceived as acceptable if the alternative suggested position does not interfere with the semantic interpretative value communicated through the narrative as a whole, whereas an alternative position is perceived as unacceptable if it would change the suggested content of the narrative. However, dream narratives do not necessarily exemplify coherence in every instance. The displacement-set method in this study draws upon specific semantic cohesive ties in order to deconstruct a dream narrative into structural units.

In addition, some structural units are semantically interwoven, the first clause of which can be placed at an alternative position, whereas other clauses within the same unit cannot be moved independently. The results of the possible alternative positions of the clauses of the examined narratives are documented in ten different displacement-set charts, for which the *x*-scale at the left-hand side and the *y*-scale at the top of each of the ten charts represent a row and a column for each single clause of the examined narrative. Subsequently, the documented clause displacement-positions establish a visual pattern in the displacement chart, dividing the narrative into different structural units. Shared structural characteristics between all ten examined narratives may suggest a valuable hypothesis of a generally applicable structural framework pattern for dream narratives.

RESULTS

Results of Structural Analysis of Dream Narratives

The results of the structural framework analysis showed that dream narratives are constructed on the basis of the following temporally organized structural units: (1) Topic introduction, (2) Orientation, (3) Complication, (4) Evaluation, and (5) Coda. The results were established through the employment of displacement charts. An example of a displacement chart can be seen in Table 1, and the transcription conventions and the transcript of the corresponding dream narrative are in the appendix.

Functional Analysis of Dream Narratives

Topic Introduction

The first structural unit of dream narratives can be understood by drawing on a conversational analytic perspective. Taking into consideration that the examined

dream narratives were produced on the basis of an interview situation that aimed to elicit these narratives from the male and female participants, the actual topic frame was established and introduced through the researcher's question, "Can you recollect a dream in as much detail as possible?", which is obviously a "proposal designed to elicit this participation in advance" (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 29), and thus the subsequent conversational turn is directed to the participant. This structural feature is specifically associated with a face-to-face research interview aiming to prompt a dream-narrative recollection, which would be perhaps unlikely to happen in natural or less formal conversational circumstances. Perhaps the nearest equivalent to the research question in natural conversations would be "What did you dream last night?" which in relation to this study might shed light on "the structure of the narratives and how they were introduced into the everyday conversation that this interview simulated" (Labov, 1997 p. 395).

Orientation

Dream narratives employ two different types of orientations, which I will call *real-life orientations* and *dream-content orientations*. Firstly, real-life orientations communicate a possible trigger for the dream event and can be described as specific and important events in the narrator's life, such as the example of child-birth in narrative [3] in lines 1–3: [1] *ahm was is quite ah a dream that's quite refers to my life right now* / [2] *cause I recently – my partner gave birth to our first baby – first child baby daughter* / [3] *and so that's putting it in context*. Or, they can just be mundane everyday occurrences, such as in the female narrative [1], *but ahm I grew up – ah grew up in the [xxx]¹ in Croydon*, or the hair-care routine in narrative [1] in line 2: *cause then I was at my hair care (and had it) every six weeks colored*. Hence, real-life orientations function as a causal and temporal bridge between a past real-life event and the dream event, placing specific focus upon the dream event in a concrete, real spatio-temporal relationship, and thus functioning as a boundary-defining device for "the course-of-action organization of the story" (Sacks, 1995, p. 242).

In addition, events described in real-life orientations share the common characteristics of illustrating a discourse, which can be discussed independently from the dream narrative if specific questions are directed towards the described real-life events. Consequently, the conveyed information "introduces autobiographical or historical background that could lead to surprising acts, thoughts, or feelings of particular protagonists" (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 131) and implies, to a certain extent, that the narrator presupposes that the experienced dream is related to real-life events and that dreams are not a product of chance alone.

Furthermore, real-life orientations indicate to the listener that the subsequent narrative employs a first-person perspective, where the actual personal pronoun "I" reflects an imaginary-based version of the real narrator's "I". This can therefore be distinguished between the narrator's real "I" and the virtual protagonist "I", since the narrator "cannot say 'I' other than through the substitute 'I' and the image is

¹ Material impossible to make out is represented as [xxx].

Table 1. Narrative 1

Clause	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1	–																
2		–	+														
3		+	–														
4		+		–	+												
5				+	–												
6						–						+					
7							–	+	+		+	+					+
8								–	+		+	+					+
9								+	–	+	+	+					–
10								+	+	–	+	+					
11								+	+		–	+					
12								+	+		+	–	+				
13								+	+		+	+	–				
14														–			
15															–		
16																–	
17																	–

only an image a double of the ‘real author’, as representation, detached from his or her body” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1999, pp. 379–380). Hence, the events and actions of the dream have no physical real-life effect on the real “I”, other than an emotional impact, since dreams indicate creative imaginary acts.

Secondly, dream-content orientations relate to the actual occurrence and event of the recollected dream, providing details of the spatial indication, the protagonist’s and antagonist’s situation or action, the description of which acts to bring the narrative closer to the listener. Spatial information in particular reflects “the speaker’s staging-strategy of the conveyed event, which is extremely common when the participant is being made the focus of attention as main actor in the subsequent discourse” (McCarthy, 1991, p. 54). This can be observed, for example, in narrative [2] in lines 2 and 3, [2] what I had to do was / [3] as in my kitchen in my flat, or in narrative [3]: *I was on* (laughter) a plane and Britney Spears was there (laughter). Both examples reflect the creation of the virtual space of the past dream event, in which the imaginary protagonist “I” existed and experienced the actions and events described in the subsequent narrative account.

In Labovian terms, we may encounter “the most characteristic feature of narratives of personal experiences, the particular viewpoint from which the action is seen” (Labov, 1997, p. 411), highlighting in specific the spatio-temporal relation indicating that the narrative event is situated in the past, and also that the past event is located in an irreal spatio-temporal frame. Hence, through communicating the dream event, the narrator is able to reflect and dissociate simultaneously between the imagined protagonist virtual “I” and the real “I”. Both “I” versions appear to deal with similar events, yet both events, one related to real life and one related to the dream event, have to be distinguished. The protagonist virtual “I” is not able to act freely within the irreal spatio-temporal frame or to influence directly external circumstances, and is in fact out of control and at the mercy of his own uncontrollable imagination, whereas the real “I” is able to influence external real-life situations and other people, yet is at the mercy of his own and the will of others.

Complication

The complication of a narrative is indicated by the gathering of the relevant remembered event data regarding the experienced action of the protagonist “I” into an organized, clear and temporal order through a normative-employed past simple tense, for example in narrative [3] in line 6, *we had another ahm gave – my partner gave birth to another daughter*, or sometimes in the historical present tense, which can be observed in narrative [2] in line 16: *basically is – she comes next to me she has got really long hair and she is quite a short girl*.

A complication in a dream narrative describes a turning point or dramatic arc within the narrative that outlines a problem, crisis or any other change in flow, possibly indicating a stagnation of the narrative. In relation to the examined dream narratives, two types of complication can be observed. I will call the first type *developing complication* and the second type *simple complication*.

In developing complications an initial complication develops and then leads to further complication during the course of the narrative. Hence, the complication describes a temporal development. For example, narrative [1] suggests a problematic situation in line 3 of the dream-orientation unit: *so I dreamt that ahm I had bit of a radical hairstyle*. This builds upon the initial situation, as lines 6–8 state, [6] *practically I tried to get home from my hairdresser / [7] cause my hair to sort it out / and I just kept walking to different ahm places I recommend and people I knew*, and line 11 suggests an additional complication: *and I just couldn't quite get home to change it*. Lines 12–13 convey a more complicated situation: [12] *and just the pink was getting pinker and the white was getting whiter / [13] and it was all going a bit wrong and a bit*.

These examples show that a complication can develop over the course of the entire complication unit, drawing on several interrelated complications. A similar pattern can also be observed in narrative [5], where the notion of complication is mentioned in line 6, *and we were all lying down in some sort of triangle shape but sort of lying against each other which was a bit odd*, and then the next complication is introduced in line 10, *but they were still not that interested in it*, until a climax is reached in line 13: *until I eventually started crying a bit I think*. Consequently, developing complications reflect the interaction of several antagonists with the protagonists, informing the event's action with further complications, which are causally and temporally interdependent.

In contrast, in simple complications, the communicated complication conveys the description of a problematic situation, which in itself does not necessarily develop any further within the structural complication unit. This can be observed, for example, in narrative [3] in lines 4–5, [4] *and ah yeah yeah she wanted to crash the plane / [5] but I said “Wait till I get off it please”*, in narrative [4] in line 4, *and ahm she was ahm playing with her baby and ahm then next it started raining*, in the second dream episode of narrative [4] in lines 7–8, [7] *we were surfing / [8] and ahm there were like this really massive waves*, and in the continuation of the complication after the embedded evaluation in line 9, *but it was quite scary*. The complication continues in lines 10–11, [10] *everybody was drowning / [11] and there were – ahm there were sharks in the waves*, both complications which describe a complicated state in time.

Narrative [1], on the other hand, might suggest a more complex complication, which can occur in two different ways. However, this does not suggest the devel-

opment of a complication, which can be observed in lines 8–12: [8] either I don't know my lines / [9] and I ah stand and have anything to say / [10] or I do remember my lines in the performance / [11] and I have a brace in the – it has a plate in the kind of the upper mouth. These examples show that the employed simple complications describe a problematic or complicated event without suggesting a temporal context in which the complication develops, thus creating new complicated events.

Furthermore, narrative [2] suggests a temporally disorganized structural complication dynamic initiated through the employment of an analepsis² in lines 9 and 10, *and I am looking on it and I thinking it was a nice place to go/but then as soon as I got there it wasn't like that at all*, referring to an event temporally situated before the narrative account, and an analepsis in line 11, *there wasn't any cowgirls and cowboys*, referring back to lines 7–8, [7] and it suddenly changed in to a more modern style bar, quite a high bar, I mean quite high / [8] and yeah, it wasn't like cowboy cowgirl sort of bar anymore because it was more like of [xxx] closed blinds it was kind of dark and clean, which is referring to the previous complication in lines 4–8. After the analepsis, the complication continues in line 12: *anyways and when I went once inside the bar it turned into a modern day style bar*.

A similar example can be observed in the semantically and disorganised complication of narrative [2], for which the analepsis in line 2, *what I had to do was*, precedes the dream-content orientation, which appears different in relation to other dream narratives. Subsequently, the complication in lines 4–10 is followed by an analepsis in lines 9–10, [9] and where my flat is – / [10] and the kitchen window is bound to the balcony so you can walk by, and then followed by a prolepsis³ in lines 11–13, [11] and the people who were kind of judging me were like a panel of people ahm / [12] who were ahm judging my – the level of my washing up / [13] ahm but these people were not significant people in my life, before the narrative continues with a complication in line 14: *there were people ahm like there was*.

The inability to recall and organize the dream narrative in a cohesive structured temporal order of events might reflect the narrator's initial dream experience of simultaneously processing the visual imagery of new spatial information and a new protagonist within the dream narrative. Hence, spatial information and protagonist information appear to compete for the most appropriate structural placement within the dream recall, for which protagonist information is placed in between two bits of spatial information. Hence, spatial information is favored within the structural frame set, yet protagonist information might have an equal informative value for the whole narrative.

In addition, the employment of analepsis and prolepsis in dream narratives might shed light on possible underlying “cognitive operations that operate in the reverse order” (Labov, 2006, p. 37). The narrator perhaps recalls specific scenarios and images in a narrative-style structure, which are perceived to evoke or be associated with emotions, and when combined reveal a clearer phenomenological picture of the narrator's felt emotional landscape, drawing to a certain extent upon

² Analepsis can be defined as “an achronological movement back in time, so that a chronologically earlier incident is related later in the text” (Toolan, 2005, p. 43).

³ Prolepsis can be defined as “an achronological movement forward in time, so that a future event is related textually “before its time”, before the presentation of chronologically intermediate events” (Toolan, 2005, p. 43).

the notion of experienced dream bizarreness and the dreamer's disorientation being confronted retrospectively with the elusive images and felt emotions during the dream.

Evaluation

Evaluations can be perceived as an underlying secondary structure in a narrative, since they convey judgment with an attached emotional or ideological value and stand in relation to the described actions and circumstances of the recapitulated dream event. Hence, in an evaluation, the narrator reflects upon and verbalizes the remembered past event and consequently enriches the narrative, explicitly or implicitly, with the narrator's personal involvement and feelings, and "reveals the attitude of the narrator towards the narrative by emphasizing the relative importance of some narrative units as opposed to others" (Labov & Waletzky, 1967, p. 37).

This also communicates the relatability of the narrative, because a narrative without an evaluation "lacks significance: it has no point" (Labov & Waletzky, 1967, p. 33). In addition, dreams might not propose a real-life influencing event, yet often the emotions and feelings aroused through a specific dream are the most remembered and make a dream narrative interesting because of the inflicted emotional impact. Consequently, the evaluation offers space for the narrator to make sense of the dream event and to communicate his or her reflections about the dream event to the listener, as, for example, in narrative [1] in lines 14–16: [14] and ah funny very funny / [15] I kept bumping into things / [16] it is a bit of a comical dream right which made me laugh this morning ahm.

Furthermore, evaluations can appear as an explanation for a communicated event at a previous point in the narrative, as in narrative [4] in line 8, *and it meant that to get from one place to the other I had to walk across kind of traitorous really thin ahm plateaus to get to the other side*, and in narrative [1] in lines 12–13: [12] and it means I can't speak / [13] ahm so either way I am stopped from doing or saying what I want to say.

Moreover, evaluations can reflect the function of a pre-closing sequence. The summarizing evaluation of narrative [5] appears to illustrate this function very clearly, drawing attention to lines 14–16: [14] ahm and then thought of yeah then that was pretty much it / [15] you know what the beginning was so and the crying / [16] and I slowed down and lay on the ground.

Coda

The closing sequence shows that the narrative account might have focused solely on a short coherent narrative sequence from a longer and durative dream event, for which the participant's individual capacity and ability to access the memory draws a natural end to the narrative. The coda of a narrative is often introduced through a change of tense in relation to the overall employed tense of the narrative. This indicates to the listener that the temporal narrative sequence is about to end since the temporal coherence is interrupted and functions as a

temporal bridge between the past event of the narrative and the actual, grounded spatio-temporal properties of the present moment and the listener.

Narrators often introduce the end of a narrative through closing statements, such as narrative [1]'s closing statement in line 19, *but yeah ah that's about it*, or narrative [4] in line 12: *ahm and I can't really remember anything else from it*. Controversially, some narratives reflect the sudden ending of a narrative sequence, which can be observed in narrative [4] in line 9, *and I think that there was an element of me being followed by someone*, and narrative [5] in line 11: *and* – then I woke up.

Omission of Structural Resolution Unit

Having examined the structural framework of the dream narratives, it appears that in terms of the employed displacement-set method, a structural resolution unit could not be established, which consequently imposes a challenge for or restriction upon the structural framework of narratives established by Labov and Waletzky (1967). However, the fact that no precise resolution unit could be established might support Labov's (1997) suggestion that resolution coincides with the coda, indicating that the analyzed dream narratives simply end with a coda in order to "bring the narrative back to the time of telling" and that "the resolution of a narrative was simply the ending or outcome; there was no very precise way of distinguishing it from the last complication action" (Labov, 1997, p. 414).

Nonetheless, narrative [2] reflects the notion of embedded resolutions, which proposes a resolution within the structural evaluation unit in line 24, *and yeah I think I have to ask her why don't I ask her* reflecting the narrator's aim to resolve the conflicting situation in a real-life situation and the narrator's view of dreams "as having a final point of completion within a grounded social and spatio-temporal environment and the narrator tries explicitly to direct our attention to this end of the process" (Saeed, 2003, p. 121).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study shows that the recollection of dream narratives reflects the employment of a homogenous structural pattern, which can be outlined as 1) Topic introduction; 2) Orientation; 3) Complication; 4) Evaluation; and 5) Coda. The omission of the resolution unit, as proposed in Labov and Waletzky (1966), supports Labov's (1997) suggestion that the resolution and coda cannot necessarily be differentiated.

Moreover, irregularities within the narrative structure might be due, firstly, to the simultaneous processing of spatial and protagonist information, and secondly, reflecting the narrator's indirect experience of dream bizarreness. Specifically, this dream bizarreness might also draw attention to the reportability of the dream event, which may not necessarily be confined to the causal ties of the dream event as such, but also emphasize the communication of the narrator's evoked emotions as a possible source in selecting reportable dream events, irrespective of underlying causal ties and the temporal order of the events.

However, this study represents the first of its kind in relation to dream narratives, and it is therefore necessary to conduct further qualitative or quantitative research including a wider demographic population, such as different age groups, social and ethnic backgrounds, and psychopathology.

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APPENDIX

Transcription Conventions of the Displacement-Set Charts

A minus sign (–) indicates the original position of a clause of a dream narrative, for which each plus sign (+) indicates a possible alternative clause position for a tested clause of a dream narrative. A colored sign indicates a structural unit, a particular clause, or a set of several clauses established within the structural framework of a dream narrative.

The coding for the structural framework units are as follows:

1. “T” indicates a structural topic introduction unit.
2. “R” indicates a structural real-life orientation unit.
3. “D” indicates a structural dream content orientation unit.
4. “C” indicates a structural complication unit.
5. “A” indicates a structural analepsis unit.
6. “P” indicates a structural prolepsis unit.
7. “E” indicates a structural evaluation unit.
8. “Co” indicates a structural coda unit.

Narrative [1]

Topic Introduction

1. Ahm the dream I had ah recently

Real-life Orientation

2. cause then I was at my hair care (and had it) every six weeks colored

Dream-content Orientation

3. so I dreamt that ahm I had bit of a radical hairstyle
4. it was blonde ahm white mane and pink big chunks of my hair
5. which was I would never do

Complication

6. practically I tried to get home from my hairdresser
7. cause my hair to sort it out
8. and I just kept walking to different ahm places I recommend and people I knew
9. and I was just like my hair my hair and stuff
10. cause the ball's this week ahm
11. and I just couldn't quite get home to change it
12. and just the pink was getting pinker and the white was getting whiter
13. and it was all going a bit wrong and a bit

Evaluation

14. and ah funny very funny
15. I kept bumping into things
16. it is a bit of a comical dream right which made me laugh this morning ahm

Coda

17. but yeah ah that's about it.